

## COMICS



Managing editor Victor Gorelick, left, with co-owners and co-publishers Michael Silberkleit and Richard Goldwater, at the Archie Comics building in Mamaroneck, New York. *Photograph by Art Streiber.*

## American Idol

At 65, Archie Andrews has somehow remained relevant, even hip, in an increasingly crass culture. But he still can't choose between Betty and Veronica. How did this World War II-era goofball manage to stay current? The little girls understand.

by JIM WINDOLF [VF.COM](http://VF.COM) December 20, 2006

One of the most durable characters to emerge from American pop culture—right up there with Mickey Mouse, Superman, and Muhammad Ali—is Archibald Andrews, the eternal 16-year-old from Riverdale, U.S.A. He is in his 65th year, but he still can't decide between Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge.

Archie is more average than average, distinctive only for his klutziness and his tendency to go gaga for girls who pass by. He's not a brain, not a jock. He waffles on the main question of Betty versus Veronica and tries to take the path of least resistance on date nights. Like someone stuck in a recurring dream, he finds himself in the same scenario again and again. In his first appearance, in 1941, he accidentally destroys a prize family portrait belonging to Betty's father. "Oh, you imbecile!" says Mr. Cooper. In 2006 he messes up Mr. Lodge's lawn with some inept yard work. "Archie Andrews, you idiot!" says Mr. Lodge.

Always an easy mark for fads, Archie tries out a Beatnik persona with his friend Forsythe "Jughead" Jones in a 1959 story. "Fizz us up a blast, Pops," he says when ordering a soda at the Chok'lit Shop. In a 1967 comic, dressed in a smart purple suit with drainpipe pants, Archie is proud of his fashionable, Carnaby Street-inspired look. But he can also be something of a scold, an enforcer of social norms, as when he tries to stop Jughead from going punk in a 1983 installment. "Man!" Archie says, gazing at the Club Chaos mosh pit. "This isn't a nightclub! It's a convention for weirdos!"

In Mexico and South America, he is Archi Gomez. He's big in Scandinavia, Italy, Greece, India, South Korea, the Netherlands, and Indonesia. He's especially popular throughout Canada, including Quebec, although he never made it big in France, where Asterix and Tintin are the comic-book kings. He entered the Mideast market in 2006, thanks to an arrangement worked out between Archie Comics and a Kuwaiti entrepreneur. Betty and Veronica don't show quite as much leg and cleavage in the Arabic version, but otherwise it's the same slightly sex-tinged high jinks.

Archie comes for you when you're roughly 10 years old, when romance is a far-off rumbling. It's a hazy time. Teachers cease to



See an annotated portfolio of Archie through the years.

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exist the moment they leave the school building. Other adults are incomprehensible beings who hide in offices all day, performing secret tasks. At night Mom or Dad will slam a bedroom door, and you have no idea why. History is a rumor, science a series of magic tricks. Pets die. Grandparents too. Movies are filled with jokes and references just beyond your mental grasp. The choices at the iTunes store are bewildering. The president's father was also once the president, apparently. You like garish colors.

To a person ensconced in this tweenage nightmare, Archie comic books are objects of fascination and comfort. In bright, crisp images, they provide an idealized glimpse of adolescence, while presenting their readers with various identities to sample and test themselves against: Archie, the well-meaning bumbler; Betty, the good girl; Veronica, the vain hottie; Jughead, the secure nonconformist; and Reggie Mantle, the overly confident stud muffin.

Archie Comics Publications, Inc., a family enterprise that has so far resisted the advances of major media companies, sells more than 550,000 magazines per month, according to BPA Worldwide, which audits circulations. Sixty percent of the Archie audience is made up of girls between the ages of 6 and 12. The 32-page saddle-bound comic books documenting the Riverdale gang's misadventures come in seven flavors: *Archie*, *Jughead*, *Betty*, *Veronica*, *Betty and Veronica*, *Betty and Veronica Spectacular*, *Archie and Friends*. An eighth comic book, *Sabrina*, features a latecomer to Riverdale, a teenage witch who first appeared in 1962. After a 2005 makeover,

Sabrina is now drawn in the cute, big-eyed manga style imported from Japan. In addition, the company puts out various pocket-size comic books, such as *Archie's Digest*, which mix old and new material and are big impulse buys at supermarket checkout lines.

As part of an experimental makeover, Archie and his friends will have a new, more sophisticated look this spring. Drawn by frequent Archie Comics artist Steven Butler, the gang will have a more realistic appearance, with new hairstyles for the girls. Betty will trade in her classic ponytail for two "bungee cords" spilling away from her head, and Veronica will have a long black mane. The new-look characters will appear in four 25-page stories that will run across four issues of *Betty & Veronica Double Digest*, the first one going on sale May 14.

All told, the company sells approximately six million comic books a year in the U.S. alone. (By way of comparison, D.C. Comics' Youth Network, which publishes kid-oriented versions of Superman and Batman, sells a shade below that number.) With the children's section of the local chain bookstore's having replaced the comics shop or candy store as a major kid hangout, Archie Comics has also gotten in on the book market, having recently published seven *Americana* collections of Archie tales from the 1940s (a jitterbug contest) through the 1980s (the kids make a video for "NTV" with "Michael Jackstone"). In this decade, the Archie characters have been text-messaging, listening to songs on iPods, and blowing their noses into anti-viral tissues.

Archie headquarters is a dingy office in the commuter town of Mamaroneck, New York, just down the road from the Winged Foot Golf Club, of U.S. Open fame. But we're far from idyllic Riverdale. The two-story Archie workshop lies between a car-repair garage and a dump. Roughly 20 full-time employees field the work of nearly 50 writers and artists, all of whom work freelance from their homes. Two of the company's founding partners were Louis Silberkleit, formerly a publisher of pulp fiction magazines, and John Goldwater, who had toiled as an itinerant newspaperman and dockworker before getting into comics. They started off in an office at 213 Church Street in Manhattan. Over the years Silberkleit stuck to the business end of things, while Goldwater poked his head into the creative side from time to time. Their sons, Richard Goldwater and Michael Silberkleit, run the business today.

"I'll give you a little history of the company," says Michael Silberkleit, seated behind his big, cluttered desk. He looks like a successful internist. Sydney Pollack would play him in the movie. On the wall is a blown-up photo of a sailboat he has piloted through Long Island Sound, its mainsail emblazoned with Archie's face. "My dad, Louis Silberkleit, and his partner, John Goldwater, were publishing superhero comics." He pulls out a copy of *The Shield*. "This kind of stuff. And John was influenced, I believe, by Andy Hardy, these Andy Hardy movies, with Mickey Rooney. And he said he felt there was a need for an Everyman character. He went into the art department and said, 'Who can draw an Everyman character, something like a teenager?' So Bob

Montana, who was an artist, came up with the likeness of Archie."

The matter of who was the main creator of Archie and the gang has been the subject of rancorous dispute. After Bob Montana died, in 1975, his heirs objected to Goldwater's taking so much of the credit. In 1996 they filed a lawsuit against Archie Comics in the hopes that a judge would rule Bob Montana the real Archie-daddy. Led by Goldwater, who would die in 1999, the company fought back. "There was a settlement," says Steven Grill, the lawyer for Montana's heirs. "The terms are confidential." Since the settlement, every Archie product has listed John Goldwater as "creator." The name Bob Montana falls under a separate credit line that defines him as the "creator" of "the original characters' likenesses."

"It will always be debated, between the families, who created Archie," says Steve Geppi, a comics distributor and founder of Geppi's Entertainment Museum, in Baltimore. "Bottom line, it's a beloved character."

Comic-book scholar Jerry Weist, formerly the director of the comic collection at Sotheby's auction house, puts his money on the artist. "I think it's true that Goldwater went to Montana and said, 'Here's what we want.' But all he had was the kernel of an idea. Beyond that, I'd say it's all Montana."

The son of vaudeville performers who joined his parents onstage as a boy, Montana populated Archie comics with characters he had known while attending high school in Haverhill, Massachusetts, and then Manchester, New Hampshire. Just as Riverdale has its Chok'lit Shop, Haverhill once had a teenage hangout called the Chocolate Shop, on Merrimack Street.

Archie first appeared in issue No. 22 of a comic book titled *Pep*. The credit line for that one read, simply enough, "By Montana." The issue date of that book was December 22, 1941, two weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

"So here was a comic book that had superhero stories and this Archie story," says Michael Silberkleit. "It was so successful that after that they published *Archie* comics, with Archie stories, and gradually stopped publishing superhero characters. We were the first teenage-humor comic, I guess you would call it."

Riverdale began as a tranquil wartime oasis, a reminder of what we were fighting for. A daily *Archie* strip was running in 800 newspapers just two years after Archie's debut; the character was also a radio star as early as 1944. In peacetime, he made a perfect match for a new creature on the scene: the teenager with spending money. A vestige of the franchise's 1940s roots remains in the form of Jughead's hat. In those days, explains Archie Comics managing editor Victor Gorelick, kids would take their fathers' discarded fedoras, cut off the brims, and scissor them into jagged beanies. Archie artists have recently tried giving Jughead a backward baseball cap in an effort to make him more up-to-date, but fans always cry out for the crown.

Archie and his friends won over an audience not served by any other comic book, girls, a fact noted by feminist pop-culture historian Trina Robbins in her 1999 book, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines*. With the help of this heretofore untapped audience, the company sold a million copies a month in the war's aftermath—but the craze ended in 1954, with the publication of Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, a best-selling treatise arguing that comics contributed to juvenile delinquency. Congress took immediate notice. Censorship pressures put an end to all but one of the magazines in William Gaines's horror-heavy EC Comics fold. (The lone survivor was *Mad*, which parodied Archie as "Starchie" in 1954.) Superhero comics also felt the industry-wide sting, although their circulation numbers had already been halved, in the immediate postwar years, with peacetime readers no longer in need of stories about magical men saving the world from evil. The Riverdale gang was clean-cut enough to elude the congressional comic-book hearings led by Senator Estes Kefauver, but sales at Archie dropped, too. Things got worse when comic-book fans turned their attention to the first cartoon programs on TV.

In an effort to police themselves before they were policed, the comic-book companies formed the Comics Code Authority. "If you wanted to have the Code seal on your book, you had to agree to have it read by a committee, so they could make sure your editorial adhered to the guidelines," Silberkleit says. "If you saw the guidelines, my God. You couldn't show an animal leaping out of the bushes in the jungle if its claws were exposed. You couldn't show somebody holding a knife. But we never had a problem. From time to time they would find something they thought was objectionable, mainly in the way the girls were portrayed."

The guidelines have since been updated, and each Archie comic book still bears the Comics Code seal. (So do the racier *Simpsons* comic books; *Star Wars* comics do not.) "I would say that having that seal on there makes me feel good," Silberkleit says. "From

time to time people have said, 'Why don't you make it a little more edgy?' And I say, 'I don't want to make it edgy.'"

At the start of the 1960s, Archie still wore his by then trademark bow tie and a school sweater befitting a rah-rah 1920s-era student. Then came Dan DeCarlo, a former pinup artist who established a new house style at Archie Comics. Archie lost his scrunched, Howdy Doody–like visage, becoming a little more traditionally attractive. Betty and Veronica traded in their coiffed glamour for a fresher look. Because it was the 1960s, they sang folk songs and wore miniskirts. Archie began going around in jeans and striped jerseys. On the whole, however, the franchise looked askance at the rising counterculture. In a 1964 comic called "Bop That Beetle," Archie meets a long-haired kid new in town. He tugs on the boy's Beatle-style mop-top, thinking it's a wig. In a 1968 comic, the ever irksome Reggie Mantle, having gone hippie, hands Archie a pink rose. But so much for flower power: a bee pops out of the petals and stings him on the nose.

Archie hasn't lasted by going against the current, however. Toward the end of the 60s, he gave in to the changing times enough to take up electric guitar. Music impresario Don Kirshner, weary of the back talk from his Beatles knockoff group, the Monkees, licensed the Archie characters. Thus was born *The Archies Show*, a popular Filmation animated TV series. [\[Watch the opening theme on YouTube.\]](#) Archie played guitar and sang lead vocals. Jughead hit the drums. Veronica played a flimsy red keyboard. Betty repetitively, and not necessarily in time with the music, tapped a tambourine against her hip. And Reggie appeared to play rhythm guitar. Manhattan songwriter-arranger-producer Jeff Barry was the main musical brain behind the group, and singer Ron Dante dubbed Archie's singing voice. The show spawned six LPs and the hit song "Sugar, Sugar," the No. 1 single for all of 1969, according to *Billboard*. [\[Watch the "Sugar, Sugar" video on YouTube.\]](#) "We still get royalty payments for that today," Silberkleit says. At that point, the Beatles, deep in their miserable *Let It Be* phase, were far from the cheeky lads who had arrived at John F. Kennedy International Airport in 1964. Even the Monkees made a trippy movie, *Head*, as the decade waned. The Archies filled a need at the time, and history has been kind to their bubblegum pop, emphasizing its cheery tunefulness and ignoring its utter lack of meaning.

With the Archies all over TV and radio, spin-off characters Josie and the Pussycats and Sabrina the Teenage Witch appeared in cartoon series of their own. In 1996 a live-action Sabrina movie, with Melissa Joan Hart in the lead role, appeared on Showtime. A sitcom version anchored the Friday-night lineup for Disney's ABC from 1996 to 2000, before moving on to the WB network. "I was at a cocktail party," Silberkleit says, "and who do I bump into but [then Disney head] Michael Eisner. I figure, Well, here we go. I said, 'How in the world could you take *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* off the air?' And he gave me some answer that I thought was all wrong." Sabrina has had two more cartoon series since 1999.

In 2001, MGM-Universal made *Josie and the Pussycats*, starring Rachael Leigh Cook, Tara Reid, Rosario Dawson, and Parker Posey. "Universal insisted on making it a PG-13 movie," Silberkleit says. "We said, 'Archie is not PG-13. You're crazy.' They said, 'You don't understand—it's the MTV crowd.' We said, 'No, it's the Nickelodeon crowd.' We made money, but we could have done much better."

In the wake of its release, Silberkleit and Goldwater formed Archie Entertainment. Instead of licensing its characters, the company now develops projects in-house. A possible Archie musical lies with Broadway producers Barry and Fran Weissler of *Chicago* fame, Silberkleit says. A Betty-and-Veronica film, set up at Miramax, went into possibly permanent turnaround when Disney and the Weinstein brothers split, in 2005.

"The Weinstains decided they didn't want the property, and Disney said, 'We don't want it,' which I can understand, because they were making *High School Musical*, which is Archie," Silberkleit says. *High School Musical*, the massive Disney Channel and DVD hit, is just one production that borrows from Archie, according to Silberkleit. Others were the 1970s ABC sitcom *Happy Days* and the stage and movie musical *Grease*. "There have been so many rip-offs," he says. "I remember *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. That was a great Archie story. Kids playing hooky and the truant officer gets his comeuppance in the end. One of these days, in my lifetime, I hope, you're going to go to the movie theater and see an Archie movie."

Licensing agreements have led Archie down some weird avenues. A 1990 TV movie, the unintentionally depressing *Archie: To Riverdale and Back*, shows the gang at age 30. Archie is engaged to a woman not from Riverdale and has Rabbit Angstrom–like yearnings for his lost youth. Veronica's father tries to have him murdered. Good old Jughead is a balding psychiatrist. This was one pilot that didn't get picked up.

An odder outgrowth appeared in 1973. While Archie, Jughead, Betty, and Veronica grappled with disco, the gas shortage, and punk rock throughout the 1970s, a seemingly mutant version of the Archie comic books was circulating among Christian

teenagers. The series came about thanks to Al Hartley, a talented Archie Comics artist who had a side job adapting materials for the New Jersey–based Spire Christian Comics. Hartley, who had drawn the *Patsy Walker* comic book at D.C. for 10 years, as well as a sexy exploitation book called *Pussycat*, had a born-again experience in 1967 and was relieved when he was able to leave all that behind and go to work as a regular Archie artist.

After working at the company a while, he approached his boss with the idea of using Archie as a kind of evangelist. Although he was Jewish, John Goldwater signed off on the deal with Spire, arguing that a Christian Archie line would fit his "wholesome family message," as *The New York Times* reported. And so Hartley turned out 18 Archie comic books with titles such as *Jughead's Soul Food*, *Archie's Parables*, and *Archie's Sonshine*.

Here we find an alternate-universe Riverdale, in which Archie gives a birthday present to the school principal, Mr. Wetherbee, and Betty says grace in the cafeteria. "A lot of us thank the Lord for our food!" Archie tells a mustachioed TV reporter who comes to Riverdale High looking to dig up dirt on America's youth. "We thank him for EVERYTHING!!!" The reporter asks, "Doesn't it EMBARRASS you to sit in front of your FELLOW STUDENTS and say 'grace'???" To which Archie replies, "We'd be embarrassed to sit in front of GOD and NOT say 'grace'!!!"

Those books, Silberkleit points out, were intended for the Christian market only. But Kliph Nesteroff, a fan who amassed "thousands" of Archie comics as a kid, says he found the religious Archie books easy to come by while growing up in British Columbia.

"I was a huge, huge Archie guy," recalls Nesteroff, a regular on CBC Radio who has a witty pop-culture-history blog called Generation Exploitation. "My grandmother had a box of coverless comics in her basement, mostly superhero stuff, which wasn't really my bag, and I remember finding [a Christian] Archie comic, which excited me very much. I didn't know what it was, initially. The very first page had something that would never appear in an Archie comic: Archie and Jughead discover that a bomb threat had been phoned in to Riverdale High. I remember being blown away that such a serious topic would be brought up."

He was more blown away when he saw the panels that depicted Betty saying grace. "I remember Betty Cooper is praying in the cafeteria, and Archie is like, 'That's Betty Cooper. She's praying before her meal. We all pray in Riverdale.' I'd read probably 500 Archie comics at that point. I knew Archie pretty well, so his statement that 'We all pray in Riverdale' made me mad. I was like, 'Archie, you're lying! None of you pray!' I thought he was pretending to be a Christian." Nesteroff's onetime obsession led him to write a detailed history of the Christian Archies for his site.

The final Christian Archie comic came out in 1982. "That was a really nice piece of business for a long time," Silberkleit says. If copies had fallen into secular hands, he adds, that was not the company's intention: "One thing we don't want is people telling us they got an Archie comic to be entertained and they're being preached to."

Although the evangelical rendering of Archie looks now like some rogue version of a beloved character, it was of its time as much as Don Kirshner's bubblegum take had been in the previous decade. These were the years that gave us an overtly religious U.S. president in Jimmy Carter. "We should live our lives as though Christ were coming this afternoon," he said eight months before taking office. Archie's Christian phase also overlapped with that of another weather vane, Bob Dylan, who, during a 1979 concert, told his audience, "I keep reading about the situation in Iran. But we're not worried about it, 'cause we know the world's gonna be destroyed. We know Jesus is coming back."

Archie and Dylan may have more in common than fans of either would care to admit. They both find a way to stay relevant, no matter what the cultural temperature. And they're the only two people to have worn drainpipe pants while releasing hit singles in the 60s only to embrace Fundamentalism in the 1970s. Dylan also stole a page from the Archie playbook by appearing among scantily clad women in a commercial for Victoria's Secret in 2004, the very same year that Veronica lost her bikini top to a wave. See *Veronica's Double Digest* No. 126 for details.

Veteran artist Stan Goldberg, who has drawn 200 consecutive Archie comic books, says he never gets tired of Riverdale. His main job is penciling—creating the initial drawings, based on stories from writers, which are then finished by inkers—and he is known as a stickler for detail. When an inker failed recently to add Archie's trademark freckles, Goldberg just about lost it. "I couldn't believe what I was seeing," he says. "The inker, I'm not close to him. It was a big mess-up. You can get away with something like

that on a small head, but this was a big head." He called his editor, Victor Gorelick, and, he says, "I blew my cork."

Barbara Slate, a comic-book writer-artist who has been coming up with Archie scripts for more than 10 years, focuses on Betty and Veronica in her work. She once created a very tough women's comic for D.C., *Angel Love*, which lasted nine issues before passing into legend, but says she doesn't feel constrained when she's in Riverdale. "We need both," she says. "We need the nice, clean comic and the one that's very gritty and tells kids they're not alone."

Archie comics make for an absorbing but light read. The words are simple, the jokes none too taxing, and the narrative zips along. Many of the same kids who lose themselves in the world of Harry Potter, a place where beloved friends may die, find another type of escape when they enter sunnier Riverdale. But Archie comics are potent in their own way. Plump valentine hearts float above the heads of newly love-struck characters. The Riverdale air is thick with love. There's kissing. The mood is always mild, but *Archie* is nonetheless something of a flashlight read.

Early on, in *Pep*, Betty was literally the girl next door. Veronica, who looked more like a smoky *film noir* vamp than a high-school student, began spicing up the narrative starting with the fourth *Pep* issue to feature Archie, and an indestructible love triangle was born. In 1994, Archie Comics rejuvenated the franchise by announcing that its title character would finally choose between his two crushes.

"We made every major newspaper in America," Silberkleit says. "Guess what. He never really decided. He found Cheryl Blossom, who he figures is not bad."

Cheryl Blossom, a minor character, is rich and busty, like Veronica, only more so. A redhead, she served time in Riverdale starting in 1982, matching up nicely with the mood of conspicuous-consumption television extravaganzas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, before leaving town on an indefinite hiatus after she proved not such a hit with readers—only to return just in time for the Betty-Veronica showdown. Archie's decision, or non-decision, may have been a cheat, especially after all the hype promising a choice, but without the love triangle there'd be little left to propel the stories.

Silberkleit is too pragmatic to allow the company's ever vacillating hero to make that fatal decision, and he has enough of the show-business huckster in him to enjoy the sport of teasing his audience, Barnum-style. Citing another comic-book stunt of recent years, he says with a laugh, "They went and killed Superman and all of a sudden he's back!"

Now we live in careful times. Anyone can be offended, anyone can sue. Anyone can cancel a subscription in these supposed end times of print. The Archie characters, as always, reflect the national mood. Riverdale's dumb jock, Moose Mason, no longer begins his every utterance with the word "Duh." He has also been diagnosed with dyslexia. Once terribly possessive of his girlfriend, Midge Clump, he also doesn't pound guys who give her the eye. Ethel Muggs, who was Riverdale's homeliest girl for decades, has lost her buckteeth. These days she's even kind of cute. Jughead, too, is no longer the proud woman-hater he once was. In a recent *Jughead* comic, he ends up with a girl in two stories. Veronica Lodge remains rich and vain—but that's useful for a comic book deep into fashion. In an upcoming comic she'll carry a little dog in her purse, Paris Hilton-style.

Nancy Woods and Chuck Clayton, African-American characters, have joined the crew, as has a Japanese-American girl named Tomoko. The characters' moms no longer wait on the kids hand and foot. Betty Cooper briefly went Goth in an effort to win some attention from Archie and the gang, who had been taking her for granted. She let loose her ponytail, wore a black dress and black lipstick, and even drank chai with new friends. But she was relieved when her old pals sought her out, dressed in the Goth style themselves. As for fickle Archie, he still gives girls the eye, but the word "Boing" no longer appears in bold red capitals behind his head when he encounters an attractive specimen.

Archie comic books are blander than they used to be, but they offer a gentleness rare in this pulsating media environment, where a lap dance is shown on an eight p.m. sitcom (*30 Rock*, first episode); where detailed Viagra commercials punctuate daytime broadcasts of baseball and football games; where a state of war and the threat of attack have been constants for most of the *Archie* readers' lives; where parents make videos of their young children singing and dancing along with "My Humps" and proudly upload the footage onto YouTube; and where teenagers use the same site to make public their most wretched 42 seconds of drunkenness. Archie comics continue to reflect the times, but they also provide a safe zone for kids in need of a break from the assault. In his refusal to join the party, Archie, at 65, may be something of a rebel at last.